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ALAM HALFA: A STUDY OF HIGH COMMAND

BY

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ALAM HALFA: A STUDY OF HIGH COMMAND

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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## ABSTRACT

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In recent years the army has adopted rigorous programs which evaluate the competence and leadership abilities of its combat leaders. For the first time, senior leaders are being formally evaluated as they command their units in the simulated combat environment provided by the Battle Combat Training Program (BCTP). Preparation for BCTP will require introspection and thought as the commander develops his concept of the operation and establishes the vision to guide his organization. This paper can assist the commander in this effort by challenging his thought processes and by provoking him to find answers to the problems of command. It describes the Battle of Alam Halfa which was fought in North Africa in 1942. It is appropriate because its major participant, General Bernard Montgomery, had a uniquely "BCTP-type" mission. He was expected to assume command, imprint his methods and procedures on his army, and fight a major battle within a two-week period. The study includes an overview of the following: the situation in North Africa during the summer of 1942; the steps Montgomery took to prepare his force for battle; and the fighting itself. It concludes with an analysis of the battle using the AirLand Battle imperatives. *Military Command/Leadership*

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ALAM HALFA: A STUDY OF HIGH COMMAND

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the army has experienced significant growth in its approach to training. Its new training philosophy, developed at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin California, centers on the simulation of battle. Units and commanders are evaluated on their ability to fight in conditions which recreate the atmosphere of actual combat. Using opposing forces, evaluators, and automation, NTC cadre can monitor a unit's activities and provide an excellent review of its strengths and weaknesses.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, resource constraints prevent the use of the NTC training model in large units. It would be impractical to evaluate more than a brigade at Fort Irwin. Yet, the benefits of the NTC have been so impressive that the army has shown interest in providing similar training benefits to its major units. To do this, it has developed the Battle Combat Training Program (BCTP). BCTP is a computer-driven command post exercise that conveys the stress and intensity found at the NTC. As brigades and battalions are challenged at the NTC, divisions and corps are now required to fight using the gaming and analytic tools provided in BCTP.<sup>2</sup>

Preparation for BCTP requires thought and introspection. It would be valuable for the senior leader who is readying himself and his organization for BCTP to have access to historical studies focusing on commanders who have prepared forces and won on the battlefield. I do not suggest that history holds the secret to success in BCTP; but, I am certain that a thoughtful commander can use history to prompt himself to ask the right questions and to assist in the search for the right answers. This paper presents such a study. It describes the Battle of Alam Halfa which occurred from 31 August to 6 September 1942 in North Africa. It contains the following:

- an overview of the events leading to the battle
- a discussion of General Bernard Montgomery's efforts to prepare his army to fight
- a description of the battle itself
- an analysis of the battle using the imperatives of the AirLand Battle found in Field Manual 100-5, Operations.

ENDNOTES

1. Daniel P. Bolger, Dragons at War: 2-34th Infantry in the Mojave, pp. 1-31.
2. Thomas D. Morgan, "Training the BCTP Way," Army Trainer, Winter 1989, pp. 12-14.

CHAPTER II  
PRELUDE TO BATTLE  
THE BRITISH

The prestige of the British Eighth Army in North Africa reached its lowest ebb in June 1942. Its commander, General Neil Ritchie, was relieved following successive defeats at <sup>1</sup> Gazala and Tobruk. On 25 June, Ritchie's superior, Claude Auchinleck, Great Britain's commander-in-chief in the Middle East, personally assumed command of the Eighth Army. Under his direction, British forces retreated from Mersa Matruh in Libya to a defensive line between El Alamein and the <sup>2</sup> Quattara Depression only 60 miles from Cairo. (Figure 1)

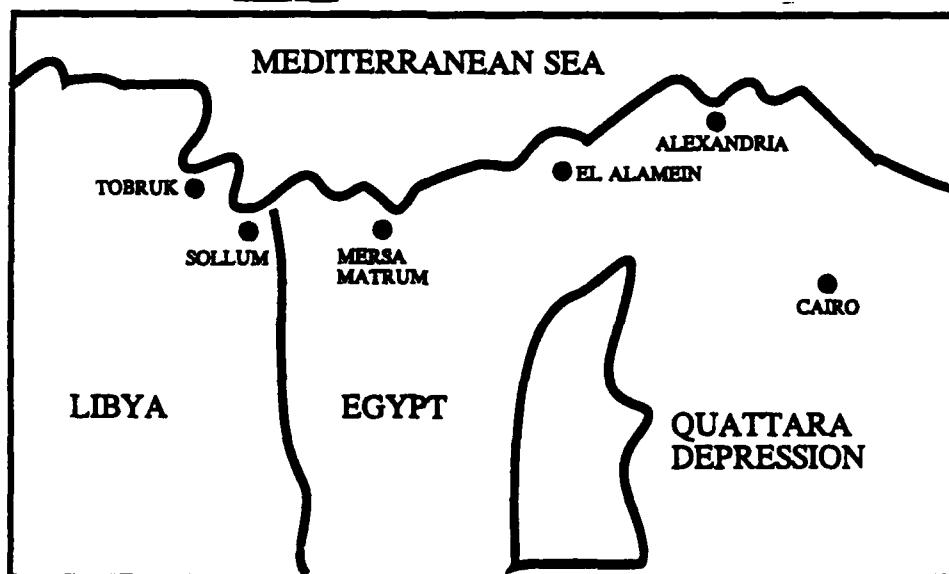


Figure 1. The Western Desert

During July 1942, General Auchinleck conducted a series of limited attacks from El Alamein designed to blunt the

advance of General Erwin Rommel's Panzer Army Afrika which  
had pursued his forces into Egypt. These attacks were  
successful and forced Rommel into defensive positions  
opposite the British. (Figure 2)

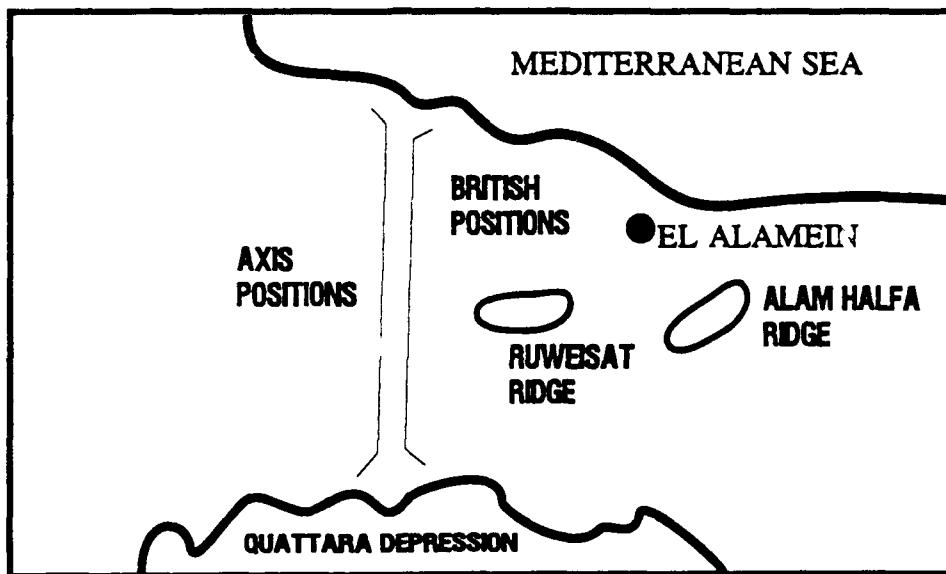


Figure 2. The El Alamein Positions

The Eighth Army used the period following Auchinleck's offensive to rebuild. Frightened at the prospect of complete failure in North Africa, the British government rushed fresh units and equipment into the theater. The army was particularly fortunate to receive large quantities of American materiel, including 300 new Sherman tanks.<sup>4</sup>

As the army reconstituted, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill became increasingly concerned about the pace of operations. He wanted Auchinleck to resume the offensive immediately. Churchill badly needed a

victory. Great Britain's war in Asia had ended in the surrender at Singapore on 15 February 1942, and the Russians were criticizing him for failing to bear enough of the war  
5 effort.

General Auchinleck attempted to pacify Churchill, but an offensive before the army had absorbed its newly arriving men and equipment made little sense. As the theater commander, his responsibilities went well beyond the Western Desert. His greatest concern was to protect Britain's Middle East oil fields. He could not risk the defeat of the  
6 Eighth Army.

Auchinleck's position became untenable. Although genuinely offensive-minded, and although he was establishing the conditions for ultimate victory, he could not move quickly enough to satisfy Churchill. In early August, the Prime Minister visited the desert and held a series of meetings with Auchinleck and his staff. Churchill left more  
7 convinced than ever that change was necessary. Justifiably or not, Auchinleck was relieved. In his place, Churchill designated General Harold Alexander as commander-in-chief and General W. H. E. Gott as Commander, Eighth Army. Gott was killed several days later. Following his death, General Bernard L. Montgomery was designated Eighth  
8 Army Commander.

### THE AXIS

The Axis army's situation at El Alamein was, if anything, worse than that of the British. While the Eighth Army's lines of communication were short, reaching only 90 kilometers to Alexandria, the Panzer Army's stretched 550 kilometers to Tobruk and 1000 kilometers to Benghazi. Despite its victories in the desert, the Axis had suffered heavily. Between May and September it had lost nearly 13,000 irreplaceable German troops and another 16,000 Italians. The Royal Navy and Air Force operating in the Mediterranean Sea made it difficult to resupply the army and <sup>9</sup> to replace its battle losses. The Germans assumed that the British would attain tactical superiority by late <sup>10</sup> September.

The Axis command had several options. First, the Panzer Army could remain in position and prepare for a British attack. Second, it could withdraw and establish new defenses at Sollum in Libya. This would greatly reduce the distance supplies and replacements would travel, thus assisting in the restoration of the army's strength. It would, however, concede territory to the British and allow them to rebuild their forces without threat of attack. The third and most difficult option was to conduct yet another attack aimed at breaking through to the Nile River and of <sup>11</sup> destroying the Eighth Army.

A rational analysis of the Panzer Army's capabilities might have dictated that it hold in place or withdraw. Yet, its weaknesses were counterbalanced by its excellent fighting qualities. Also, the British had been bled badly and were themselves in a period of reorganization. Might another victory be possible? Rommel was unsure. He was sick and perhaps dispirited at this point. The spartan life and tension had taken its toll on his health, and he suffered from liver problems and a nasal infection.<sup>12</sup> If left to himself, it is probable that he would not have attacked, but the decision would not be his alone.

The summer of 1942 marked the high-water point in German arms. Europe had been conquered. German armies were attacking in Russia. The Sixth Army was approaching the outskirts of Stalingrad. The possibility of a massive pincer movement from Egypt and Russia converging on the Middle East oil fields seemed possible. Given this backdrop,<sup>13</sup> withdrawal in Africa was unthinkable. Echoing Winston Churchill, Hitler demanded an attack.

Having little choice and unwilling to stand firm as had Auchinleck, Rommel agreed to Hitler's call for an offensive. He insisted, however, on guarantees of resources--particularly for 6000 tons of fuel. The Italians, who were responsible for his supply, gave those guarantees.<sup>14</sup>

### GENERAL ROMMEL'S PLAN

Rommel decided that an attack would best be carried out in late August, thus allowing sufficient time to build strength and still to attack before the British grew too strong. The problem was in determining how to pierce the Eighth Army's defenses at El Alamein. There was no assailable flank. The British northern shoulder rested on the Mediterranean Sea and its southern shoulder tied into the wasteland of the Quattara Depression. The thirty-mile front was well-manned and protected by mines and trenches.

Rommel's intelligence of the British order of battle was fairly accurate. He knew that the 9th Australian Division held the British right flank and that it was supported by the 1st South African Division. He also knew that the 5th Indian and 2d New Zealand Divisions held the center with the 7th and 10th Armored Divisions holding the southernmost flank.<sup>15</sup> The British were very strong, and a way had to be found to counteract that strength.

Rommel's logistic weaknesses and the size of the British force ruled out a battle of attrition. A quick penetration on a narrow front would be necessary. Rommel decided to launch an attack using the German Afrika Korps (15th and 21st Panzer Divisions). This force, supported by the German 90th Light Division and the Italian XX Corps, would penetrate on a narrow front north of the Quattara

Depression. Once the main British line was penetrated, the Afrika Korps would continue to the east and then swing toward the Mediterranean Sea, placing itself in the British rear. Rommel had previously enjoyed great success with this tactic, attacking in difficult country where defenses were thin. Time and again, German armored forces had been able to penetrate British defenses and sweep quickly into their lines of communication.

The German plan included provisions for an initial attack near the Mediterranean Sea using the Italian Trento Division and the German 164th Infantry Division. In the center, supporting attacks would be conducted by the Italian Bologna Division and German parachutists. As these attacks were being carried out, the German armor would penetrate the southernmost British defenses and move quickly to the east. (See Figure 3.)

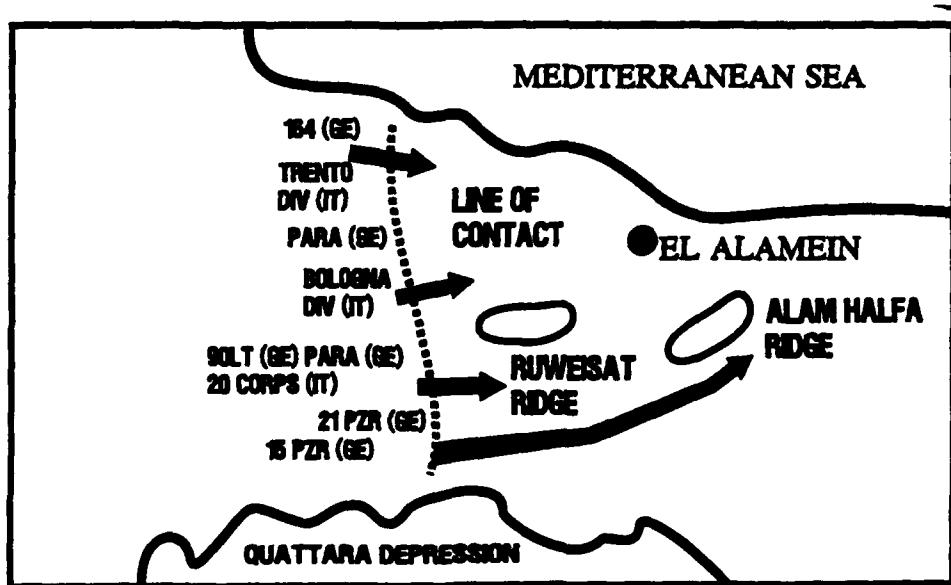


Figure 3. The Axis Attack Plan

#### ENDNOTES

1. Barrie Pitt, "The Benghazi Handicap 1940-1942," in Alamein and the Desert War, ed. by Derek Jewell, p. 19.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 20.
4. Winston Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, p. 428.
5. R. W. Thompson, Churchill and the Montgomery Myth, p. 44.
6. Ibid., p. 35.
7. Ibid., pp. 65, 66.
8. Ibid., pp. 62, 63.
9. Erwin Rommel, The Rommel Papers, ed. by B. H. Liddell Hart, pp. 260-266.
10. Paul Carell, The Foxes of the Desert, pp. 243, 244.
11. Fritz Bayerlein, "Alam Halfa: From the German Side," in A Battle Report: Alam Halfa, ed. by B. H. Liddell Hart, p. 20.
12. Carell, p. 242.
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14. Ibid.
15. Rommel, p. 272.
16. Ibid., pp. 272-274.

CHAPTER III  
MONTGOMERY IN COMMAND  
ASSESSMENT OF THE EIGHTH ARMY

As the Germans prepared to attack at El Alamein, the transfer of command instigated by Winston Churchill was taking place in the Eighth Army. On 12 August 1942, General Bernard L. Montgomery arrived in Cairo. He wasted no time and met with General Auchinleck on the morning of his arrival.

The discussion between the two generals was short and uncomfortable. Neither man was fond of the other. Auchinleck had been Montgomery's commanding officer in England earlier in the war and had found him a difficult subordinate. <sup>1</sup> Montgomery was contemptuous about the state of affairs in the Middle East and attributed much of this <sup>2</sup> to a "softness" in Auchinleck.

Auchinleck has said that he briefed Montgomery on the tactical situation and of the necessity to resume offensive operations once the Army was ready. <sup>3</sup> Montgomery refuted this in his memoirs, stating that Auchinleck spoke in negative terms, that he stressed the defense, and that he emphasized the possibility of a forced withdrawal into Egypt. <sup>4</sup> What is clear is that both generals knew that time was short. German messages intercepted through ULTRA pointed to <sup>5</sup> an early Axis offensive.

Although he was not officially to assume command of his Army until 15 August, Montgomery left Cairo on the morning of the thirteenth to observe the situation at the front. En route to the Eighth Army's field headquarters, he picked up the Army's newly appointed chief-of-staff, Francis De Guingand. He pressed De Guingand hard for his views on the status of the army. De Guingard's message was not encouraging. Montgomery wrote, "...I asked about the morale of the officers and men. He (De Guingand) said it wasn't good. The Eighth Army wanted a clear lead and a firm grip from the top; there was too much uncertainty and he thought the 'feel <sup>6</sup> of the thing' was wrong."

De Guingand's pessimism was reinforced almost immediately by the appearance of the Eighth Army's headquarters. The Air Force was nowhere to be seen. Moreover, Auchinleck had established an austere policy for his staff in which it would share the privations of the soldiers. This meant no tents, no mess facilities, and the most spartan living conditions. To Montgomery, the place seemed slip-shod and <sup>7</sup> unprofessional.

As the headquarters appeared haphazard, so did the Army's acting field commander, Lieutenant-General Ramsden of XXX Corps. His briefing to Montgomery concerning the tactical situation was shallow and indicated a lack of understanding about the work to be done.

Montgomery, by this time, had seen and heard such that disturbed him. He became anxious and overstepping his authority assumed command of the army that day. Ramsden  
8  
was sent back to his corps.

By that afternoon, Montgomery had completed an initial assessment of his command. The army headquarters, at least, seemed slack and appeared to lack purpose. After some "savage thinking," Montgomery developed the approach that he would use to imprint his vision on the Eighth Army. He would insure that the proper leaders were in place to inspire and lead its soldiers. He would find ways to build esprit de corps at the army level which could compete with the spirit shown so often by the Afrika Korps. Finally, he would inject a winning attitude into the army and build its  
9  
self-confidence.

#### INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

On the night of his arrival, Montgomery took the first steps to inspire confidence in the army's headquarters. The staff was brought together. First, De Guingand was confirmed as chief-of-staff, and then Montgomery began an attack on the status quo. Orders limiting tentage and furniture in the headquarters were revoked. The staff was told that it would move to a more convenient area and collocate with the headquarters of the Royal Air Force. More importantly, the staff was to understand that the army's mission

was to "hit Rommel for six right out of Africa." This would occur at a time of Montgomery's choosing, not Rommel's. Contingency plans for retreat to the Nile were to be burned. All discussions dealing with proposed with-  
10 drawals would cease immediately. Confident that he had moved in the right direction toward establishing a firm operating base, Montgomery began to transform his army into an effective force.

Montgomery's efforts to upgrade the fighting qualities of the army began with its senior leadership. Each general officer was evaluated in turn. Some impressed him, particularly Bernard Freyberg, the Commander of the 2d New Zealand Division and L. J. Morshead of the 9th Australian  
11 Division. Others did not fare as well. Major-General Renton, the Commander of the 7th Armored Division, quickly embroiled himself in an argument with Montgomery concerning the best use of tanks. Ramsden of XXX Corps had already been marked for replacement. Herbert Lumsden, a noted cavalryman, did not impress Montgomery and was eventually  
12 replaced.

Soon after General Alexander assumed command in Cairo on 15 August, Montgomery began to pull the strings necessary to place his own men in key positions. Brian Horrocks was brought from England to command XIII Corps, vacant since Gott's death. Oliver Leese soon replaced Ramsden in XXX

Corps, and Sidney Kirkman was brought in to reorganize the  
13  
army's artillery.

As he molded the Eighth Army's leadership, Montgomery's trained eyes also focused on the condition of the men in his command and of their equipment. The raw material seemed good. The soldiers had a cockiness and confidence that impressed him, but once again they appeared to lack purpose and a sense of understanding about what they were to  
14  
accomplish. They were also green. Many were newly arrived in the theater. The army was veteran but it was largely untrained. It would have particular difficulties in carrying out complex offensive operations.

Montgomery soon realized that his logistics posture was unsatisfactory. Both hard and soft-skinned vehicles had been worn out during the summer campaign. New equipment was arriving daily. Time would be necessary to properly repair and process this materiel.

Montgomery concluded, as had Auchinleck, that the army was not ready for employment. He directed that a program of  
15  
intensive training be instituted immediately. The success of this program was clearly demonstrated several weeks later during the Battle of Alam Halfa. In Horrocks' XIII Corps, the Germans reacted exactly as the British had rehearsed, making one officer comment that, "when he wanted to know during the battle what was going to happen next he  
16  
looked up the exercise."

### GENERAL MONTGOMERY'S PLAN

As important as it was to revive the leadership and the morale of the Eighth Army, it was equally important to insure that it was in the best possible position to deal with the expected Axis attack. In later years, Montgomery would insist that he constructed a defensive plan based solely on his own analysis, and without "appreciations, <sup>17</sup> plans, and so forth," from Auchinleck. This is untrue. Auchinleck's staff had prepared a defensive plan which Montgomery adopted with only two significant changes.

Auchinleck had positioned the army's two corps in the northern and southern halves of the El Alamein Line. XXX Corps, consisting of the 9th Australian, 1st South African, and 5th Indian Divisions, was responsible for the defense from the Mediterranean Sea south for approximately fifteen miles to a large terrain feature known as the Ruweisat Ridge. At that point, XIII Corps, consisting of the 2d New Zealand Division and the 7th and 10th Armored Divisions, assumed responsibility for defense to the Quattara Depression. ULTRA told Auchinleck to expect a strong German attack in the south, and he had positioned his armor to counter that threat. He envisioned a major tank battle in the XIII Corps sector, followed, if possible, by a British <sup>18</sup> counterattack. (See Figure 4.)

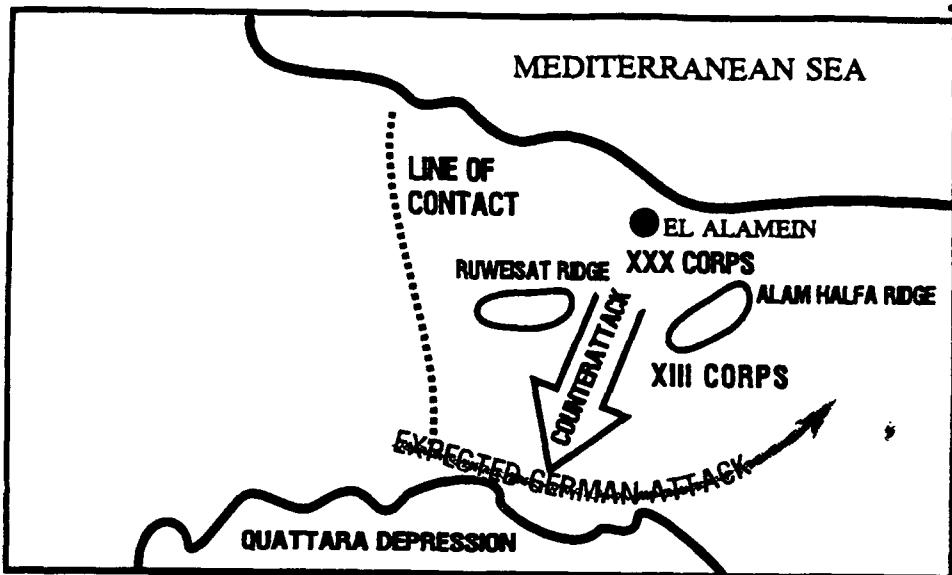


Figure 4. Auchinleck's Defense

Montgomery drove the length of his defensive line. He was particularly struck by the importance of the Ruweisat Ridge and also by the Alam Halfa Ridge which stood in the British rear. If Axis forces could secure Alam Halfa, they would be in an excellent position to cut the British lines of communication and possibly to lever the Eighth Army completely off the El Alamein positions.

Moving south, in the XIII Corps sector, Montgomery found the open hard plain between the Ruweisat Ridge and the Quattara Depression where Rommel was expected to attack. He recognized the difficulty of orchestrating a fluid battle successfully in this region, given the level of training in his army.

20  
Montgomery did make two changes to Auchinleck's plan. First, it was clear to him that a force-in-depth would be necessary at Alam Halfa Ridge in order to secure the army's rear. This he did immediately. He requested that the

newly-arrived 44th Infantry Division be moved from Cairo to  
21  
Alam Halfa. Alexander agreed. Second, and more impor-  
tantly, he reconfigured XIII Corps' mission. Montgomery did  
not want a far-ranging tank battle in the south, as foreseen  
by Auchinleck. He adopted a less ambitious approach, one  
that better fit the capabilities of his Army. Brian Hor-  
rocks, now in command of XIII Corps, was told to move his  
most potent armored force, the 22d Armored Brigade, to a  
blocking position rear Alam Halfa. He was also ordered to  
thicken the minefields between his corps and the Axis  
forces. The 7th Armored Division was to position itself  
behind these minefields. When attacked, it was not to  
engage the Germans decisively, but was to withdraw to the  
east. The Axis armor was to be blocked, or if possible,  
channeled into the prepared positions at Alam Halfa Ridge.  
Horrocks was given strict instructions not to accept battle  
in the open desert. His corps was to be preserved for  
22  
future operations. (See Figure 5.)

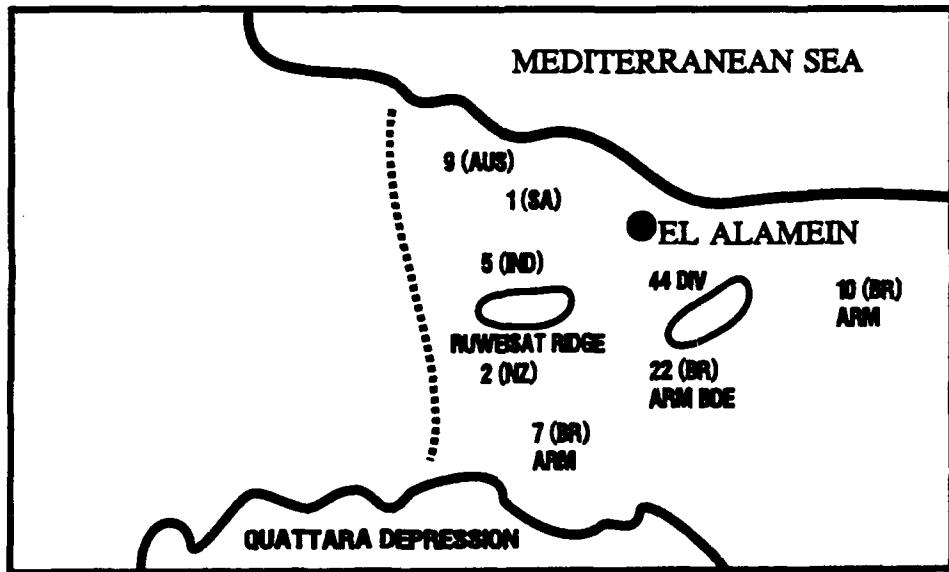


Figure 5. Montgomery's Defense

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4. B. L. Montgomery, The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery, p. 87.
5. Harold C. Deutsch, "Commanding Generals and the Use of Intelligence," Leaders and Intelligence, ed. by Michael I. Handel, p. 213.
6. Montgomery, Memoirs, pp. 89, 90.
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8. Ibid., pp. 91, 92.
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12. Ronald Lewin, Montgomery as Military Commander, pp. 62, 63.
13. Ibid..
14. Montgomery, Memoirs, p. 98.
15. Montgomery, "The Battle of Alamein," pp. 72-73.
16. Brian Horrocks, Escape to Action, p. 120.
17. Montgomery, "The Battle of Alamein," p. 70.
18. Thompson, p. 70.
19. Montgomery, "The Battle of Alamein," pp. 70, 71.
20. Montgomery, Memoirs, p. 95.
21. Ibid., p. 96.
22. Lewin, p. 70.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BATTLE OF ALAM HALFA

31 AUGUST

Shortly after midnight on 31 August 1942, the Axis attacked. The attack began in the north. The 9th Australian Division was assaulted by the Italian Trento Division and the 164th German Infantry Division. Forewarned by ULTRA of Rommel's intentions, Montgomery took no steps to reinforce the Australians or to reposition reserves. The attack was not delivered with great determination and the Australians were able to hold their positions.<sup>1</sup> Near Ruweisat Ridge a second attack was carried out with greater skill and initially enjoyed some success against the 5th Indian Division. But that too was blunted and sealed by counter-attacks.<sup>2</sup> Montgomery again took no steps to reinforce his front-line divisions.

In the south, the Afrika Korps began its movement, determined to drive 50 kilometers into the British lines by morning.<sup>3</sup> Problems occurred quickly. German reconnaissance had reported a light minefield which could be penetrated easily, but Montgomery and Horrocks had changed that, energetically widening the obstacles in the days before the battle. Moreover, the mines were well covered by direct fire and artillery.<sup>4</sup> It became clear that the Afrika Korps would have great difficulty breaking through. The supporting Italian XX Corps and the 90th Light Division also soon

reported slow-going through the minefields.

Senior German commanders rushed to the point of the attack. Their presence gave moral support, but at great cost. General von Bismarck of the 21st Panzer Division was killed; General Nehring, the commander of the Afrika Korps, was seriously wounded. Command of the attack fell to <sup>6</sup> General Fritz Bayerlein, the Afrika Korps Chief of Staff.

The attempt to penetrate the British obstacles went on through the night and into the morning. By 0930, the Germans were through, but had gained only 15 kilometers from the line of departure. Tactical surprise was lost, <sup>7</sup> and the attack was 12 hours behind schedule. Worse, the <sup>8</sup> Royal Air Force began intensive carpet bombing.

Rommel was forced to evaluate his situation. A deep attack followed by a movement to the Mediterranean Sea was now impossible. The question was whether his army had the strength to continue toward a more limited objective or whether it should turn back and consolidate in its pre-battle positions. After discussions with Bayerlein, Rommel decided to continue the attack, orienting it toward Alam Halfa Ridge. In so doing, he unwittingly would send his <sup>9</sup> men against the main British strength.

In accordance with its new instructions, 21st Panzer Division swung north. Elements of the British 7th Armored Division, which had protected the minefields, slowly withdrew before it. Following Horrocks' directions, the 7th

10

Armored Division refused decisive engagement.

22d Armored Brigade, under the command of Brigadier G. P. B. Roberts, lay directly in the Afrika Korps' path in well-prepared positions near the Alam Halfa Ridge. This brigade, armed with new American tanks, was among the best equipped units in the Eighth Army. Under Montgomery and <sup>11</sup> Horrocks it had been perfectly positioned and rehearsed.

At 1530 hours, 21st Panzer Division collided with the 22d Armored Brigade. The battle raged furiously throughout the afternoon and evening. The crisis of the battle occurred when, under great pressure, Roberts committed his reserve squadron to force the Germans back. The counter-attack was successful, and Roberts was able to hold his <sup>12</sup> position.

#### 1 SEPTEMBER

At first light on 1 September the Afrika Korps resumed its attack on the Alam Halfa Ridge.

Montgomery had by now ascertained that the ridge was the main Axis objective, and he began to move his reserves. 23d Armored Brigade of 10th Armored Division, was moved into a blocking position from which it could support 22d <sup>13</sup> Brigade. The remainder of 10th Armored Division was moved <sup>14</sup> forward to the vicinity of Alam Halfa Ridge. (See Figure 6.)

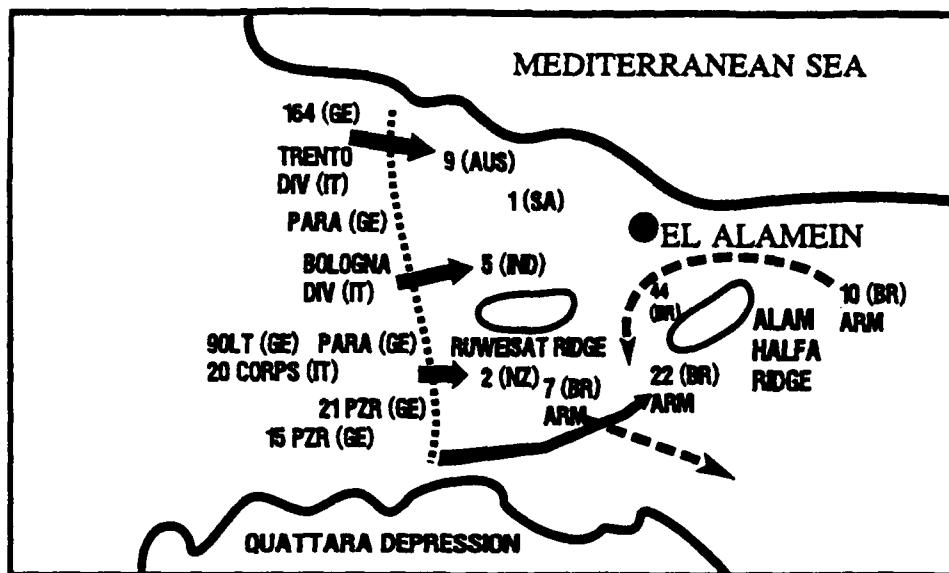


Figure 6. The Battle of Alam Halfa

In the meantime, the Germans were having great difficulty bringing fuel forward. Battlefield stocks became critically low due, in part, to the distances gasoline had to be transported and to the inability of the Axis supply system to meet Rommel's needs.

Plagued by a thickening British defense and a lack of mobility, the German attacks began to lose their vigor. Bayerlein noted that the British air and artillery was particularly effective against units on open ground. Late in the day, Rommel called off his attack, and again considered his options. <sup>16</sup> He could fall back, or he could remain in place, hopefully, luring the British into an unwise counterattack. The defeat of such a counterattack would take the momentum from the British and might lead to a resumption of the German offensive. Rommel decided to try

the second option, and on the night of 1 September the Afrika Korps began to prepare hasty defensive positions <sup>17</sup> south of Alam Halfa Ridge.

### 2 SEPTEMBER

By 2 September, the Germans had moved into new positions. Too often in North Africa, the British had taken bait similar to this and had lost victories in unsuccessful charges against dug-in German anti-tank positions. But Montgomery refused to give the order to attack. He was content to hold his armor in check and pummel the Afrika <sup>18</sup> Korps with indirect fire and massive air strikes.

### 3 SEPTEMBER

On 3 September, Rommel gave up hope for a fight in the open desert. The combined weight of British fires was taking a severe toll on his already weakened armored divisions. Montgomery would not attack him. The fuel promised by the Italians still had not arrived. With no hope left, Rommel gave the order to withdraw. Early in the morning, the Axis forces began a slow orderly retreat, starting with units facing the New Zealanders along Ruweisat Ridge. This movement weakened the northern flank of the Afrika Korps' penetration. A successful attack at that point might have cut off the Afrika Korps as it moved slowly from its defensive positions.

The typical Eighth Army approach would have been to mount a furious attack into the German flank, using all the available armor in the area. But what if the Germans defeated the tank units? The loss of his armor would delay Montgomery's plans to rebuild his army and possibly force him to postpone any offensive plans for months.

A less risky approach would be to mount an infantry-heavy attack by the New Zealanders from Ruweisat Ridge. Such an attack would be easier to control and certainly easier to "fix" if things went wrong. To Montgomery, Alam Halfa was simply not the right place to risk the army.

Montgomery opted for this less dangerous infantry attack. The 2d New Zealand Division, among the most veteran of the Army's formations, was given the mission to attack in the evening of 3 September. As with all that happened at Alam Halfa, it was as if the attack was scripted by Montgomery. After initial gains, the attack came up against stiff resistance and fell apart. The New Zealanders had trouble operating at night and coordinating the operation. They were withdrawn and little was said about the advisability of mounting further offensive operations.

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#### 4 AND 5 SEPTEMBER

On the 4th and 5th of September, the Axis forces completed their phased withdrawal from Alam Halfa. Little change in positioning had occurred in the north and center

of the El Alamein Line, but the Germans did cling to high ground located roughly in XIII Corps' initial obstacle belt.<sup>20</sup> This position gave the Germans better defensive ground and excellent observation into the southern portion of the British line. Horrocks would have liked to push the Germans back and believed that he could do so fairly easily, but Montgomery withheld permission.<sup>21</sup>

#### 6 SEPTEMBER

By the 6th of September, Alam Halfa was over. The Germans consolidated on their new position and both armies began the preparation for battles to come.

#### ENDNOTES

1. R. C. W. Thomas, The Battles of Alam Halfa and El Alamein, p. 10.
2. Ibid.
3. Bayerlein, p. 22.
4. Ibid.
5. Thomas, p. 10.
6. Bayerlein, pp. 22, 23.
7. Ibid., p. 22.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., pp. 22, 23.
10. Thomas, p. 10.
11. G. P. B. Roberts, "From the British Side," The Battle of Alam Halfa, ed. by B. H. Liddell Hart, p. 8.
12. Ibid., pp. 10, 11.
13. Horrocks, p. 123.
14. Thomas, p. 11.
15. Bayerlein, p. 24.
16. Ibid., pp. 24, 25.
17. Thomas, p. 11.
18. Bayerlein, p. 27.
19. Montgomery, "The Battle of Alamein," p. 73.
20. Thomas, p. 12.
21. Horrocks, p. 125.

## CHAPTER V

### BATTLE ANALYSIS

FM 100-5 provides ten AirLand Battle imperatives, or operating requirements, which "are fundamentally necessary for success on the modern battlefield." The ten imperatives are:

- Ensure unity of effort
- Anticipate events on the battlefield
- Concentrate combat power against enemy vulnerabilities
- Designate, sustain, and shift the main effort
- Press the fight
- Move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly
- Use terrain, weather, deception, and operational security
- Conserve strength for decisive action
- Combine arms and sister services to complement and reinforce
- Understand the effects of battle on soldiers,  
1  
units, and leaders.

I will now analyze the Battle of Alam Halfa using these imperatives and attempt to draw applications that might help a modern commander preparing for BCTP.

### ENSURE UNITY OF EFFORT

Insuring unity of effort was among General Rommel's greatest challenges during the Battle of Alam Halfa. His German units were veteran and confident organizations. Procedures were fully integrated and it was relatively easy to insure that plans were understood. The Battle of Alam Halfa would never have occurred without Rommel's supreme confidence in the Afrika Korps. He did, however, face the problem of integrating his Italian units into his battle plan. These troops were plagued with poor equipment and half-hearted leadership. Often, they were unsupportive of their government's war aims. Harnessing the Italians and the Germans properly was a continual problem for Rommel.

Much of General Montgomery's time and effort in the weeks prior to Alam Halfa also went into insuring unity of effort within the Eighth Army. Its victory was a measure of his success. Montgomery's firm direction went far toward establishing a workable command structure. His insistence, before the battle, in improving the army's leadership, in raising its morale, and in developing a workable, simple plan were as critical to his final victory as the fighting itself.

COMMENTARY. Montgomery proved at Alam Halfa that a unit can be "turned around" in a short period. He insured that the Eighth Army clearly understood its new command structure and what he wanted it to do. Similarly, the

modern commander must insure that his organization understands his vision if he expects it to fight his battle. His plan must be clearly understood, disseminated as far down the chain of command as possible, and then followed. An order, no matter how excellent, must be understood and obeyed. The commander must establish his ground rules well before the battle. Taking a page from Montgomery's book, he should consider holding a series of preliminary meetings with his commanders and staff to discuss his approach to the on-coming battle, his expectations of the command, and his personal intent. From Rommel, one can learn of the difficulties facing a combined commander who must balance the capabilities of several armies.

#### ANTICIPATE EVENTS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Rommel's ability to anticipate events and to react during battle had been a major element in his success. His extremely risky plan at Alam Halfa was made possible only by the demonstrated capabilities of his own Army and by the weaknesses of the British. Unfortunately, Rommel's intuition failed him at Alam Halfa. After a year-and-a-half in the desert, Rommel thought that he had developed a complete understanding of his enemy, but he had never faced an opponent with the patience and discipline of Montgomery. The rules were changed. Rommel also failed to anticipate the strength of the British defenses and the Eighth Army's

determination to protect those obstacles. Much of this can be explained by poor intelligence, but it is clear that Rommel did not count on the British Army's resolve to fight this battle using its rules.

General Montgomery had access to ULTRA which necessarily assisted him in determining Rommel's plan and actions. This vital intelligence tool took away much of the "fog" of war. With Rommel's intentions and capabilities an open book, Montgomery was able to react perfectly to German movements.

COMMENTARY. Alam Halfa is a good example of the difference between "knowing" the enemy and having solid intelligence. For a number of reasons, Rommel was not able to anticipate events while Montgomery had a clear "read" of the battle. The advantage is obvious. The implication for BCTP is that the commander must maximize his intelligence capabilities. He will not have a tool as efficient as ULTRA, but systems are available which can identify enemy intentions. The commander must understand what capabilities exist and how to tap into them. The modern senior commander, like Montgomery, must "read" and then "react." Good intelligence is the winning edge in battle.

CONCENTRATE COMBAT POWER AGAINST  
ENERGY VULNERABILITIES

Although ultimately unsuccessful, Rommel's battle plan at Alam Halfa is a fine example of the proper use of this imperative. The striking power of his army was concentrated on a narrow front. His mechanized divisions, supported by Italian armor, were poised to break through the British lines and move quickly into their rear. Given Rommel's information, the choice to concentrate on the assumed weakness in the British position was the proper tactical decision.

Montgomery receives mixed reviews for his ability and willingness to exploit Axis vulnerabilities. Defensively, he did well, placing his strength against Rommel's main attack. Offensively, Montgomery showed a lack of daring. He did not trust his army. He was defensive and consequently missed an opportunity to destroy the Afrika Korps as it lay exposed south of Alam Halfa Ridge between the 2d and 5th of September.

COMMENTARY. While understandable in light of his future plans, Montgomery's actions would be unforgivable today. Once the enemy's intention is clear, and a vulnerability is found, the commander must concentrate his force and strike an overwhelming blow. Today's leader, facing a Warsaw Pact threat, must contend with second echelon forces. Be it a division or an army, the second echelon threat has

taken away the commander's ability to sit back and let events take their course. The modern unit, when defending, must determine the enemy's weakness, concentrate, deliver a powerful blow, and then reorganize to receive the second echelon.

#### DESIGNATE, SUSTAIN, AND SHIFT THE MAIN EFFORT

Rommel clearly designated his main effort at Alam Halfa--the Afrika Korps' attack into XIII Corps. The main attack was understood and resourced as well as possible. Rommel did not, however, have the ability to sustain or shift the main effort once it became stalled. Part of this was driven by his unsatisfactory strength and part by his poor logistics posture. Rommel could not replace his losses or generate the combat power he needed to break through the British lines. He had very few tanks and shortages of fuel. He had no reserve to employ in a new effort. Alam Halfa was a risky "one shot" battle.

Montgomery did not officially designate a main defensive effort, but his positioning of forces demonstrated that he weighted his force. Alerted by ULTRA that the Germans would attack in the south, Montgomery placed the equivalent of two infantry and three armored divisions in his southern sector. These units were supplied and in good defensive positions. They were well supported by artillery and the Royal Air Force. Montgomery's battle plan kept a full

armored division in reserve. He would have had little problem in shifting his main defensive effort.

COMMENTARY. The modern commander must designate his main effort in order to focus combat power where it is needed. He may, however, face the same difficulties that Rommel had in forming a reserve. Unlike Rommel, he will probably have fairly strong units with good-to-excellent capabilities of moving around the battlefield. All units not decisively engaged must be prepared to assume the offensive or to counterattack. Staffs must have the capability to quickly reorient combat power in support of the new main effort. This agility, in face of overwhelming odds, may well be the difference between victory and defeat.

#### PRESS THE FIGHT

Rommel pressed his attack as far as possible, but the balance of combat power was heavily weighted against him. His single axis attack first bogged down, then ran low on fuel, and finally was out-gunned. Unable to maintain momentum, the Afrika Korps was forced into a defensive posture.

Montgomery has been criticized for not pressing the fight at Alam Halfa. He could have dealt the Axis a crippling blow as they retreated. Based on one's bias, he either insured success late at El Alamein by preserving his army or he lost a golden opportunity at Alam Halfa which would have made El Alamein unnecessary.

COMMENTARY. The lesson of Alam Halfa from the Axis side is that all actions must be supported by contingency plans. Rommel pressed the fight too much. He tried to move quickly but misjudged British strength. He foundered in the face of superior firepower. Where was the offensive to go or do once its freedom of movement was taken from it? In this case, the Afrika Korps had no viable contingency plans and remained exposed to the British fires for five days. Montgomery's unwillingness to maneuver can be criticized, but his actions might also cause one to ask if pressing a fight made sense in view of his army's weaknesses and his own future planning. Knowing when not to attack is as important as knowing when. The AirLand Battle imperatives are not cast in stone, but must be applied with wisdom.

MOVE FAST, STRIKE HARD, FINISH RAPIDLY

This imperative, more than any other, characterizes how Rommel liked to fight. His ability to move much faster than his adversaries, and to strike them unexpectedly was a key to his many successes. At Alam Halfa, this tactic failed. The German concept of operations was sound, but the British defense prevented the quick thrust needed for victory. Once on the objective, Alam Halfa Ridge, the Afrika Korps was unable to focus and sustain the combat power necessary to defeat the British.

Conversely, Montgomery was not a strong advocate of rapid movement. He was a proponent of the methodical and structured approach. His activities at Alam Halfa confirm this bias. He spurned movement, opting exclusively for defensive operations. He refused to mount a full-blooded counterattack and passed up an excellent opportunity to destroy the Germans as they retreated.

COMMENTARY. At Alam Halfa, the proponent of rapid movement, Rommel, lost the battle. Montgomery, the advocate of the set-piece battle, won. Rommel's concept was sound, but he was undone by his logistics and the weakness of his force. Montgomery, the victor, defeated the Germans but allowed them to withdraw unscathed. Could a decisive victory at Alam Halfa have made the bloody battle fought at El Alamein two months later unnecessary? The modern commander, fighting outnumbered, cannot ignore opportunities. He must substitute speed and concentration for numbers. It is imperative that enemy forces be destroyed quickly and efficiently, when and wherever possible.

#### USE TERRAIN, WEATHER, DECEPTION, AND OPSEC

Rommel's instincts were correct at Alam Halfa, but his execution was faulty. He correctly deduced that the southern route offered the best chance to rupture the British defenses. Much of his failure can be traced to poor battlefield reconnaissance. The Germans were surprised by

the strong response of the British to their attack. This failure in reconnaissance caused the Afrika Korps to fall far behind its time-schedule and gave Montgomery ample time to react to the German threat.

Montgomery's use of terrain at Alam Halfa was noteworthy. He inherited the overall defense plan from Auchinleck, but it was his eye that confirmed the importance of Alam Halfa Ridge, and it was his orders that widened the minefields in front of Horrocks' position. He devised the concept by which 7th Armored Division first blocked and channeled the Afrika Korps into the fires of 22d Armored Brigade. Montgomery's use of terrain and positioning was so good that he was consistently able to bring effective fires to bear on the Germans without repositioning his forces.

COMMENTARY. Alam Halfa proved once again that battles revolve around the proper understanding and use of terrain. The most successful commander is one who can best select the right piece of ground to defend and the right avenue upon which to attack. Positioning, the employment of firepower, the use of obstacles, etc., all are functions of proper terrain analysis.

### CONSERVE STRENGTH FOR DECISIVE ACTION

Through no fault of his own, Rommel was unable to protect his force adequately at Alam Halfa. His supply and personnel systems were insufficient, thus denying his units the men and equipment necessary to sustain them in the battle. His problems were exacerbated by the fact that his Italian troops had, to a great extent, lost their will to fight by the summer of 1942. This, in turn, put greater pressure on his German formations and diluted their combat power. Axis shortages prevented Rommel from establishing a viable reserve and from using uncommitted troops in counteroffensive roles.

Montgomery did a superb job in conserving his manpower. He emphasized training. His conservative tactics saved both men and equipment. He substituted artillery and air for infantry attacks. The military art in Alam Halfa was in the fact that the British fought successfully, but never committed a major unit. Montgomery protected his Army so well that the Germans could not reach it.

COMMENTARY. Alam Halfa provides a good lesson in conservation. One general, Rommel, was unable to protect his force and was unable to sustain the tempo of the battle. He ended with nothing to show for his efforts and a badly depleted army. His opponent, Montgomery, had the luxury of

sufficient numbers of well-supplied soldiers. He designed his plan to safeguard them and to capitalize on their strengths. He never lost sight of the greater goal beside which this particular battle paled in importance. Conservation and protection of the force coupled with vision and a clear idea of where the organization is headed will result in enhanced combat power over an extended period.

COMBINE ARMS AND SISTER SERVICES TO  
COMPLEMENT AND REINFORCE

Alam Halfa was a good demonstration of the German combined arms team in action. The armored divisions of the Afrika Korps had perfected the integration of arms, and much of its ascendency on the battlefield can be attributed to an organizational and doctrinal structure which maximized combat power. The infantry, armor, air defense, artillery, etc. worked in harmony. Once again, Rommel's weaknesses in equipment and manpower hurt him. The inability of the Luftwaffe, in particular, to stop the RAF and to support the ground attack was a major factor in the German defeat.

Montgomery displayed both strength and weaknesses as he attempted to maximize the combat power of the Eighth Army. His integration of the RAF into his planning and its operations in support of the defense were key to the British victory. A large measure of the Eighth Army's historical problems could be attributed to the fact that it did not

maximize its various capabilities. Considerable friction existed, for example, between the armor and infantry. The British difficulty in fighting the Germans in the open field can be attributed to its inability to combine arms. Auchinleck had attempted to resolve this problem by the use of combined arms task forces. To his discredit, Montgomery disbanded these columns and insisted on pure divisional elements. This did nothing to solve the problem, and British offensive operations throughout the summer were awkward and unbalanced.

COMMENTARY. Alam Halfa was not a victory for the combined arms concept. Rommel would never have attacked without faith in his armored formations, but their ability to maximize combat power was low due to their own weaknesses and weakness in the supporting arms. It is questionable whether the British could have managed a sophisticated attack such as the Germans mounted. Their organization was not oriented to combining arms and maximizing combat power. They did better in fixed defenses or in set-piece battles. The modern battle demands that every asset be integrated and maximized to the greatest extent possible. Alam Halfa is instructive because it forces one to think about the cost when arms are not combined effectively.

UNDERSTAND THE EFFECT OF BATTLE ON  
SOLDIERS, UNITS, AND LEADERS

The strength of the Axis was in the cohesion and fighting abilities of its German units. Its Achilles heel was the combat capability of its Italian forces. Finding the appropriate balance between the two nationalities, and reinforcing the Italian weaknesses with German strengths became a major factor in Axis planning. The capabilities and weaknesses of the individual soldiers and units became as important in planning as any other consideration. At Alam Halfa, the half-hearted, largely Italian, supporting attacks in the north and center fooled no one. Montgomery would have had to react had these attacks been successful.

Montgomery believed that he had a problem in the Eighth Army. The soldiers appeared to lack focus and were uncertain of their abilities to defeat Rommel and his Panzer Army. Much of Montgomery's time before the battle was spent in instilling his vision in his soldiers and in providing the kind of leadership that would pay off in combat. In many ways, Alam Halfa was fought conservatively to prove to the Eighth Army that it could win. Much of Montgomery's apparent timidity can be attributed to the fact that he wanted a victory, at any cost, to build up his Army's confidence.

COMMENTARY. Soldiers win battles. Generals plan and direct, but soldiers execute the orders. At Alam Halfa, Montgomery carefully stayed within what he perceived to be the limits of his men. Odd though it may seem, a major objective of Alam Halfa was to build morale. In that, he was successful. Rommel, again, was forced to take risks. It is clear that he asked too much of his German units and they could not give him the miracle he needed. Modern battle will ask the most of men and equipment. The senior commander must consider the morale, capabilities, and training level of his soldiers. The right balance is difficult to attain. Rommel asked too much and lost. Montgomery arguably asked too little and did not gain the complete fruits of his victory.

#### CONCLUSION

How then can the Battle of Alam Halfa help the modern commander prepare for BCTP? Obviously this battle, like any other, provides specific lessons. Many of these have been analyzed previously. I do not propose to repeat that discussion, but I do believe this battle brings up many interesting points. For example, it stresses the importance of:

- a unified force in which all elements are pulling in the same direction under a knowledgeable commander
- an adequate logistics system

- good intelligence
- a well-constructed fire plan
- inter-service cooperation, particularly with the Air Force
- a plan that focuses effort and that provides flexibility when things go wrong
- a reserve that can effect the course of battle
- hard effective training, particularly at night
- the assimilation and mastery of new equipment
- cooperation between arms
- pressing the fight and finishing off the enemy when the chance presents itself
- the importance of coming to grips with the objective, i.e., what the army is fighting to accomplish.

In short, the Battle of Alam Halfa is a storehouse full of indicators, pointers, and ideas that can significantly help the modern commander as he wrestles with the challenge that will beset his own command in BCTP.

ENDNOTES

1. FM 100-5, pp. 22-26.

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